Natural History of and Risk Factors for Idiopathic Atrial Fibrillation Recurrence (FAP Registry)

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Introduction and objectives. The natural history of idiopathic atrial fibrillation is not well understood. The aim of this study was to investigate the frequency of and risk factors for disease recurrence.

Methods. The study involved 115 patients with a first episode of paroxysmal atrial fibrillation of unknown origin who were included in the FAP registry, which contains data from 11 district hospitals in Catalonia, Spain. All patients underwent comprehensive clinical, laboratory, electrocardiographic and echocardiographic investigations at baseline and were followed up periodically every 6 months to identify the occurrence of new symptomatic episodes and their complications.

Results. During a mean follow-up period of 912 (445) days, 32 (27.8%) patients experienced recurrence of atrial fibrillation. Those who experienced recurrence had a significantly higher left ventricular ejection fraction (P = 0.023) and smaller end-systolic volume (P = 0.001), and they were more likely to consume alcohol regularly (P = 0.013). Cox regression analysis confirmed that these variables had independent prognostic value. In contrast, the occurrence of syncope during the initial episode was associated with a lower likelihood of recurrence (P = 0.017).

Conclusions. The risk of recurrence of idiopathic atrial fibrillation was high, and was enhanced by moderate alcohol consumption and increased left ventricular activity, probably of sympathetic origin. This trend was less marked in paroxysmal atrial fibrillation of vagal origin.

Key words: Atrial fibrillation. Follow-up studies. Risk factors. Alcohol. Autonomic nervous system. Echocardiography.
ABBREVIATIONS

AF: atrial fibrillation.
EF: ejection fraction.
LVEF: left ventricular ejection fraction.
LVESV: left ventricular end-systolic volume.

The study population included 115 consecutive patients examined in the emergency services or cardiology units of seven district hospitals and four outpatient clinics after initial study and during the systematic periodical visits (every six months). An echocardiogram was carried out annually. Patients were considered to be a regular drinkers if they consumed wine, beer or spirits on a daily basis in amounts lower than those considered to be the cut-off point for exclusion from the study; otherwise, they were considered to be occasional drinkers or nondrinkers. The onset of an episode of symptomatic AF (documented by electrocardiogram) 48 hours after spontaneous, electrical or pharmacological cardioversion was considered to be a recurrence.

Statistical Analysis

The data are expressed as the mean plus or minus the standard deviation or as percentages. The differences between the groups of patients with and without recurrences were analyzed using Student’s t test or the \( \chi^2 \) test. For the analysis of bivariate correlations, the Pearson correlation coefficient was employed. The cumulated risk of AF recurrence was estimated by means of Kaplan-Meier curves, and the differences between groups were assessed by the log-rank test. To identify those factors having independent predictive value with respect to recurrences, Cox regression analysis was employed. \( P \) values less than .05 were considered to indicate statistical significance. The analysis was performed with an SPSS statistical software package (version 12).

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Study Population

The 115 patients examined for a first AF episode were part of a group of 181 consecutive individuals diagnosed with primary or idiopathic AF in a baseline study, 64 of whom were excluded for having a previous history of

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AF and two because they had been treated with bronchodilators or anorectic agents during follow-up. The periodic follow-up examinations supported the initial diagnosis of idiopathic AF. There were 64 men (64.3%) and 41 women (35.7%), whose ages ranged between 23 and 82 years (52.3±14.1) years. In all the episodes, sinus rhythm was restored within 48 hours (although the inclusion criteria permitted a period of up to seven days), in 20 cases, with no treatment whatsoever (paroxysmal AF). The remaining patients received intravenous amiodarone (5-10 mg/kg body weight; n=65), flecainide or propafenone (n=15) or digoxin or beta blockers (n=17; persistent AF of more than 48 hours’ duration). Treatment was initiated early to reduce the heart rate or accelerate the restoration of sinus rhythm (class IIa indication of the ACC/AHA/ESC guidelines, 2001). Thus, the restoration was probably spontaneous in many cases. Electrical cardioversion was applied in one case.

### Risk Factors for Recurrence: Univariate Analysis

**Baseline Clinical Characteristics (Table 1)**

No significant differences were detected between the patients with or without recurrences, with the exception of the higher incidence of regular alcohol consumption among those who had recurrence (P=0.014).

### Clinical and Electrocardiographic Characteristics of Primary Atrial Fibrillation Episodes

The circumstances surrounding the onset, the symptoms of acute episodes and the electrocardiographic findings were similar in the two groups (Table 2), except for the incidence of palpitations in acute episodes (P=0.012) and the observation that none of the 16 patients with syncope in the initial episode experienced recurrences (P=0.017).

### Echocardiographic Findings

As shown in Table 3, the left ventricular end-systolic volume (LVESV) (<0.001) and left ventricular end-diastolic volume (LVEDV) (P=0.017) were lower, and LVEF was higher (P=0.023) among patients who experienced recurrences. In contrast, there was no difference in left atrial size. We were unable to demonstrate any association between LVEF or LVESV and the remainder of the variables studied, such as age, sex, body weight, height, and diastolic arterial pressure.

### Recurrence Risk

During the follow-up period (mean duration: 912±445 days), recurrence was diagnosed in 32 patients, 12 of whom experienced two. The cumulative percentage of patients with recurrences was 27.5% (5%) in the first year, 35.5% (6%) after two years and 41% (7%) after three years (Fig. 1). The frequency of episodes of primary AF was 0.84 (0.7)/year and the mean interval between episodes was 699±456 days, ranging from one week to 5.5 years. The cumulative frequency curve did not differ significantly (P=0.833) from that of the 64 patients excluded from the study for having had a previous recurrence (retrospective analysis).

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TABLE 2. Characteristics of the Atrial Fibrillation Episodes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circumstances surrounding onset</th>
<th>With Recurrence (n=32)</th>
<th>Without Recurrence (n=83)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White resting, n (%)</td>
<td>8(25.0)</td>
<td>28(33.7)</td>
<td>.495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White sleeping, n (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8(8.4)</td>
<td>.207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postprandial, n (%)</td>
<td>1(3.1)</td>
<td>2(2.4)</td>
<td>.662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White urinating, n (%)</td>
<td>3(9.4)</td>
<td>3(3.6)</td>
<td>.437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptomatology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palpitations, n (%)</td>
<td>37(96)</td>
<td>60(72.6)</td>
<td>.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysepsia, n (%)</td>
<td>10(31.3)</td>
<td>19(22.9)</td>
<td>.493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chest pain, n (%)</td>
<td>8(25)</td>
<td>19(22.9)</td>
<td>.994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syncope or presyncope, n (%)</td>
<td>0(0)</td>
<td>16(19.3)</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrocardiogram</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart rate, mean (SD), QRS/min</td>
<td>134(31)</td>
<td>136(25)</td>
<td>.805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum RR, mean (SD)</td>
<td>682.6(242)</td>
<td>741(238)</td>
<td>.595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum RR, mean (SD)</td>
<td>330.6(148)</td>
<td>358.3(91)</td>
<td>.291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference in RR, mean (SD), %</td>
<td>48(18)</td>
<td>47(14)</td>
<td>.995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episode duration, mean (SD), h</td>
<td>9.5(14)</td>
<td>8.8(13.8)</td>
<td>.834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneous reversion, n (%)</td>
<td>9(28.1)</td>
<td>11(13.2)</td>
<td>.107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Period, eight patients (6.9%) developed chronic AF, in the absence of any detectable related factors.

DISCUSSION

Risk of Recurrence

Our findings support the widely accepted view that the prognosis for primary AF, with no apparent cause, is relatively benign, although recurrences may occur with certain frequency and interfere with the life of the affected individual. The elevated incidence observed in our series (affecting 27.5% of the study population during the first year) is somewhat higher than that reported in the medical literature, and can be considered representative of a suburban population with free access to medical care provided by the social security system, which facilitates the detection of episodes. However, the published studies are far from being comparable. In the prospective ALFA study, 1 for example, the rate of recurrence within 6 to 12 months among 167 patients with paroxysmal AF was 31.3%, higher than that observed in our study, but 53.9% of the subjects presented underlying heart disease.

Factors Associated With Recurrences

The study has identified the following three independent risk factors that may play a role in the pathogenesis of primary AF and its recurrence.

More Active Ventricular Function

In the echocardiographic study, during sinus rhythm, the patients with recurrences presented increased left ventricular activity in comparison with the rest of the patients, as shown by the indexes of systolic function; increased LVEF and reduced LVESV. Given that no
relationship was observed between the LVEF or LVESV and the variables that can influence them, the increased contractility may be attributed to a predominance of sympathetic tone. This circumstance is indicated by some authors who have studied the role of the autonomic nervous system in triggering AF by analyzing the changes in heart rate at the beginning and end of the episode, as recorded by Holter monitoring, although their conclusions do not always coincide. Bettoni et al \[16\] concluded that the onset of AF was associated with an increase in adrenergic tone, followed by an abrupt increase in vagal tone. Lombardi et al \[17\] also detected an increase in sympathetic tone in the majority of their cases, and in vagal tone in the remainder. In contrast, in another series, Akyurek et al \[18\] stressed the importance of the decrease in heart rate variability, with depressed vagal tone. The greater frequency of palpitations in these patients may also be indicative of an increased sympathetic activity, although differences in heart rate are not observed. However, the possibility that the perception of palpitations and, thus, the frequency of recurrences detected by electrocardiography, might be influenced, in part, by the sensitivity of each patient can not be ruled out. Should this be the case, the patients who do not perceive palpitations may experience recurrences of which they are not conscious.

In our series, the relationship usually observed between the tendency to recur and left atrial size, reported in patients with AF of different etiologies \[3,4,13\], was not detected. In a study involving 50 patients with recurrent AF treated with flecainide, Haissaguerre et al \[21\] were also unable to confirm the existence of a relationship between left atrial size and either left ventricular dimensions or shortening fraction.

**Moderate Alcohol Consumption**

Although anecdotal evidence implicates excessive alcohol consumption in some cases of AF ("holiday heart syndrome"), the relationship between chronic alcohol consumption and risk for AF is still a matter of controversy, since the results of the published studies do not always agree. \[22\] The Copenhagen City Heart Study, an epidemiological study carried out in the general population, confirmed that the risk of AF increases in heavy drinkers (more than 35 drinks a week, nearly 50 g ethanol/day). The results of our clinical registry, from which individuals with a history of elevated acute or

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**TABLE 4. Independent Predictive Factors for Recurrences: Cox Regression Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Predictive Variables</th>
<th>β ±SE</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>RR</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recurrence</td>
<td>LVESV</td>
<td>-0.028 ±0.011</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>(0.95-0.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>0.852 ±3.323</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>(1.24-4.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presyncope</td>
<td>-1.321 ±0.605</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>(1.14-12.25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CI: confidence interval; LVESV: left ventricular end-systolic volume; RR: relative risk; SE: standard error

Variables included in the analysis: LVESV, palpitations, syncope, regular alcohol consumption (variables that presented differences in the univariate analysis, with \( P < 0.10 \)), and age, sex, arterial blood pressure and left atrial size (which have been reported to be possible determining factors for atrial fibrillation).
chronic consumption were excluded, indicate that light to moderate drinking, within limits that are not usually considered excessive, can be an important risk factor of AF recurrence and should be taken very much into account in the prophylactic strategy. However, we should have certain reservations since the establishment of a dose-effect relationship was not the purpose of this study. Aside from the fact that the total cumulative dose was not determined, the assessment of alcohol consumption and the definition of the seriousness of the ingestion are subject to errors, owing, in part, to the wide variability in the daily intake. Nevertheless, the results clearly indicate that moderate alcohol consumption is an independent risk factor for ventricular function.

Acute alcohol ingestion has been shown to lead to an exaggerated sympathetic activation, and this mechanism could be invoked to explain, at least in part, a decreased LVESV and an increased LVEF. However, if the effect of alcohol were toxic, we should expect a deterioration of these indexes and an increased LVEDV. 23

Absence of Syncopal Episodes (Atrial Fibrillation of Vagal Origin)

Most of the syncopal events that present at the onset of an episode of AF are consistent with a vasovagal mechanism, and this mechanism identifies a group of patients with vagal primary AF in whom the likelihood of recurrence is low, possibly due to the fact that the vagal hyperactivity is a transient episodic event.

Complications

The absence of thromboembolic complications during the follow-up period in our series supports the widely accepted view that the prognosis of primary AF is relatively benign given that, by definition, the major cerebrovascular risk factors (hypertension, heart failure) are not present. This contrasts with the experience reported in studies in which all types of AF were included. 24,25 Despite the fact that 60% of our patients were over 50 years old, the results are similar to those of the Trieste Area Study involving 96 young patients (under 50 years of age) with lone paroxysmal AF who underwent follow-up for 10(8) years, in whom there was only one case of ischemic stroke, two cases of transient ischemic attack and no deaths. On the other hand, in a 23-year follow-up of chronic idiopathic AF, Jouven et al. 26 found a relative risk for cardiovascular death of 4.22.

The proportion of patients who developed chronic AF (6.9%) was somewhat smaller than that reported in the ALFA study (8% of the patients with paroxysmal AF).

Limitations of the Study

Periodical follow-up examinations minimize the possibility that cases of apparently primary AF might be associated with the early stages of cardiomyopathy or AF of some other origin; even so, in the absence of specific studies, the risk that the participation of other factors, such as arterial blood pressure or sleep apnea, whose relationship to AF has been clearly documented in recent years, 27 may not be inadequately assessed can not be completely ruled out.

Moreover, there exists the risk that some only mildly symptomatic episodes of paroxysmal AF, for which the patient does not seek medical attention, go undetected, and that the real incidence of recurrence may be higher than that recorded. On the other hand, the requirement that electrocardiography be performed to confirm the recurrence rules out the possibility of false positives.

CONCLUSIONS

Idiopathic or primary AF, with no apparent underlying cause, has a benign course, although it exhibits a marked tendency to recur. This trend is favored by the increased ventricular activity, probably of sympathetic origin, and by regular consumption of moderate amounts of alcohol. In contrast, AF of vagal origin, identified by its association with presyncope symptoms, shows little likelihood of recurrence.

These observations should be duly confirmed since they indicate the possibility that patients with recurrent, apparently idiopathic AF with a LVESV of less than 40 mL or an ejection fraction greater than or equal to 65% might benefit from total abstention from alcohol consumption or the prescription of beta blockers.

Centers and Investigators Involved in the FAP Study

Hospital Municipal de Badalona: F. Planas, L. San Vicente; Hospital Esperit Sant, Santa Coloma de Gramenet: T. Poblet; Hospital Sant Boi de Llobregat: C. Romero-Menor; Hospital Comarcal de Blanes: G. Vázquez-Oliva; Hospital Comarcal de Calafell: M. Vilaseca; Hospital Comarcal Alt Penedès: A. Descaçá; Hospital de Palamós: P. Antínez; Instituto Universitario Dexeus: M.J. Salvador; CAP Sant Andreu: X. Armengol; Policlínica Rehaster: L. Banchs; Consulta Rocafort: M. Campillo.

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REFERENCES


